

UNDER THE WEATHER

Healing a Hernia

Bruno's guardian brought him to the clinic in a state of panic. "He's developed a big growth overnight," she wailed. I checked the lump she showed me. It was a soft mass right at the base of the tail on the right side. It's a hernia, I told her. It must have been small, and you may not have noticed it since he's so furry, but right now it's quite big and needs immediate attention. But how do you know it's a hernia and not a growth? From the feel, the fact that's it is soft to touch and reduces with pressure...

We did Bruno's X-rays and ultrasound which showed that the bladder had prolapsed into the hernia, therefore the sudden increase in size. His surgery was done, the hernia was repaired and the bladder was fixed to the abdominal wall to prevent further recurrences should the hernia occur again.

Just like humans, animals too suffer from hernias. A hernia is an opening or tear in a muscle mass that allows tissue or organs to pass through it (or herniate). The rim of the hernia is called the ring. If the hernia is not long standing, the tissue does not have adhesions, and the contents can be pushed back through the ring.

The most common hernia in pets is an umbilical hernia where the umbilical opening (the cord which connects the pup to mother before birth) doesn't fuse soon after birth, and intestinal fat passes through the opening and lies just under the skin. These hernias are usually simple to repair, and this is mostly done at the time of neutering.

Inguinal hernias are seen in the groin area on the inner surface of the rear legs. Another common type of hernia is the perineal hernia (on one or both sides of the anus). This happens due to constant straining due to a low fibre diet leading to constipation. What happens when a pet has a hernia? Sometimes if the hernia is very small and only fat comes through, it doesn't create any problems, however, in



**DR SANGEETA
VENGSAKAR SHAH**

many cases untreated hernias can have serious consequences. This happens when the intestines or the bladder herniates through the ring.

A problem arises when the blood supply of the herniated organ gets cut off. That section gets deprived of oxygen and nutrients and dies, necessitating an emergency surgery to push it back in place.

Symptoms of hernias are very variable, and depend on the type and position of hernia, and organs that are displaced. Eg, in a diaphragmatic hernia, where the wall that separates the chest from the stomach has a hernia, you may have the stomach, spleen, liver or intestines herniating into the chest, causing severe respiratory distress. This hernia is not even visible from outside, and needs X-rays to diagnose it.

In other external hernias, the hernia may be soft and non-reactive if it is silent, or hard, painful and red if herniated contents are affected. The pet then develops a fever, is restless, goes off food and water and is severely lethargic. As the tissue dies, the affected area turns into an abscess and metabolic waste products are released into the body. These may affect the liver and kidney and cause these organs to fail rapidly, especially in older animals. Without treatment, chances of survival are minimal, therefore an emergency surgery is needed.

How are hernias repaired. First the herniated material is put back in the correct position. Then the hernial ring is closed, either by suturing the muscles together or by using a mesh to support the muscle wall. Any adhesions to the underlying tissues are removed before doing this. The patient is then put on stool softeners to avoid straining post-operatively. Sutures are removed 10-15 days post-operatively.

With timely intervention, most hernia cases recover smoothly and uneventfully. 





